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ABSTRACT

Parent involvement in schools is related to children's increased academic achievement and can be an important resource for school personnel. Parents of racial and ethnic minority groups, however, have been found to be less likely to become involved in their children's schools. This study investigated whether white and racial and ethnic minority parents differed in their satisfaction with their children's school and perceived alienation from schools in general. It was hypothesized that parents from minority groups would report less satisfaction and more feelings of alienation than white parents. Parents of 169 elementary school children (10 African American, 50 Hispanic American, 59 Southeast Asian, 8 other Asian American, 31 White, and 11 "other") completed surveys about satisfaction and alienation. Results indicate that there were no significant differences in reported satisfaction of white and racial and ethnic minority parents or in their alienation from school. White parents, however, perceived their children's teachers to be more understanding of their needs as a parent, and believed that parents should give schools more input about how to teach than minority group parents did. Implications for educational administrators and family counselors include the need to encourage racial and ethnic minority parents to make their needs known to school personnel. (Contains 2 tables and 16 references.) (Author/SLD)

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PARENT SATISFACTION AND ALIENATION FROM SCHOOLS: EXAMINING ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

Parent involvement in schools is related to children's increased academic achievement and can be an important resource for school personnel. Racial/ethnic parents, however, have been found to be less likely to become involved in their child's school. The present study investigated whether White and racial/ethnic parents differed in their satisfaction with their child's school and perceived alienation from schools in general. It was hypothesized that racial/ethnic parents would report less satisfaction and more feelings of alienation than White parents. Parents of elementary school children completed surveys of their satisfaction and alienation. Results indicate that there were no significant differences in White and racial/ethnic parents' reported satisfaction with, or alienation from school. White parents, however, perceived their child's teacher to be more understanding of their needs as a parent, and believed that parents should give schools more input about how to teach their child that racial/ethnic parents. Implications for educational administrators and family counselors include the need to encourage racial/ethnic parents to make their needs known to school personnel.

Introduction

Today's youth face a host of social problems including gang violence, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy. Many of these difficulties have been linked to poor academic performance or dropping out of school altogether.

Racial/ethnic youth are particularly at risk for academic difficulties. For example, in Fresno County, despite the fact that racial/ethnic students make up 66% of the total enrollment, dropout rates are two to three times higher for these students than for White students (Fresno County Office of Research and Evaluation, 1993). Others have found racial/ethnic students' dropout rates, suspension rates, and placements in mentally or emotionally retarded classes to be disproportionately high (Cardenas & First, 1983).

One approach to improving student academic performance is to increase parental involvement in their children's education. For example, increased parent involvement has been found to be positively related to school, social, and academic achievement (Epstein, 1987; Henderson, 1987), even among low-income populations (Clark, 1984; Comer, 1988; Henderson, 1987; Scott-Jones, 1987). Unfortunately, racial/ethnic parents have a more difficult time becoming involved with their children's education and are less likely than White parents to do so (Klimes-Dugan, Lopez, Nelson, & Adelman, 1992; Lopez, 1993), despite the fact that racial/ethnic parents have been found to feel that their involvement was more important than did White parents (Stevenson,

Chen, & Uttal, 1990). Possible reasons for racial/ethnic parents lesser involvement may include shyness, cultural tendencies not to express opinions, immigration status, feeling unwelcomed in the schools, language differences, and not knowing what to expect (Burke, 1991). Racial/ethnic parents have also been found to feel more alienated from society in general and schools in particular (Carnegie Corporation, 1984), a fact which has also been proposed as a possible explanation for racial/ethnic parent's lesser involvement in schools (Calabrese, 1990).

Changing U.S. demographics make it critical for schools to increase their attention to, and abilities to effectively serve racial/ethnic families. For example, by 2000, the percentage of White students enrolled in California public schools is expected to decrease by half, while the percentage of Hispanic students is expected to double (Fresno County Office of Research and Evaluation, 1993). Nevertheless, approximately 80% of all teachers in California public schools are White (Fresno County Office of Research and Evaluation, 1993) (see Table 1). Clearly, schools need to continue to find ways to meet the changing needs of the families they serve.

In an effort to measure the extent to which parents perceive their needs as being met, this study investigated whether racial/ethnic and White parents differed in their satisfaction with their child's school and perceived alienation from schools in general. It was hypothesized that racial/ethnic parents would report less satisfaction and more feelings of alienation than

questions on a five-point, Likert-type scale. Parents were also asked to indicate the amount of input they felt parents should give schools on a four point scale ranging from "none - teaching the child is the school's job, not mine" to "a lot - staying in touch on a regular basis." In addition, parents were asked to provide demographic information.

Translation

Because the families surveyed came from a variety of ethnic and language backgrounds, English, Spanish, and Hmong versions of the survey were developed. These constituted the primary languages spoken by most of the parents. Parents either received an English only, or a Spanish and an English version, or a Hmong and an English version of the survey, according to school records of the family's primary language.

Results

Participants were 169 parents of children enrolled in an urban elementary school in Central California. Parents ranged in age from 18 to 72 with a mean age of 36. Fifty-three were men, 113 were women, and three did not indicate gender. Ten of the parents were African American, 50 were Hispanic, 59 Southeast Asian, 8 other Asian American, 31 White, and 11 either described themselves as "other" or did not indicate their ethnicity. Most of the parents who responded indicated that they were immigrants (58), 21 were "first generation", 13 were "second generation", 19 were "third generation", and 37 parents were "fourth generation or more" in the United States.

White parents.

Methods

Sample

Parents were volunteers and completed surveys which included questions about their satisfaction with their child's school and teacher, and their perceived alienation from schools. Surveys were sent home to each family with a child enrolled in the school. Of the 296 surveys distributed, 169 parents completed and returned surveys.

Measures

Because the Dean Alienation Scale (Conger, 1973) has been criticized as too general (Bean, 1986; Calabrese & Anderson, 1986; Wentz, 1979), a modified version designed to measure alienation from schools was developed for this research. The modified alienation scale consisted of twenty statements such as "Parents are not really important in what goes on at schools" and "There are few dependable ties between parents and the schools anymore" to which parents responded on a five-point, Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disaagree."

Parents' overall satisfaction with their child's school was assessed by asking "Overall, how satisfied have you been with your interactions with _____ school?". Satisfaction with their child's teacher was measured using the question "How satisfied have you been with your interactions with your child's teacher?". Parents were also asked "How understanding is your child's teacher of your needs as a parent?" and responded to these

Means and standard deviations for all variables were calculated and are shown in Table 2. A series of one-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were calculated to determine if White parents differed significantly from racial/ethnic parents on overall satisfaction, alienation, satisfaction with their child's teacher, the extent to which they felt their child's teacher was understanding of their needs, and amount of input they felt parents should give schools. Results indicated that there were no differences between the two groups in level of overall satisfaction ($df=1$, $F=1.63$, $p=.21$), alienation ($df=1$, $F=.21$, $p=.65$), or satisfaction with their child's teacher ($df=1$, $F=1.84$, $p=.18$). White parents, however, reported feeling their child's teacher was significantly more understanding of their needs as a parent than did racial/ethnic parents ($df=1$, $F=13.74$, $p=.0001$). White parents also reported feeling parents should give schools significantly more input about how to teach their child than did racial/ethnic students ($df=1$, $F=3.87$, $p=.05$).

Discussion

Results did not support the hypothesis that White parents are more satisfied with their interactions with their child's school in general, nor their child's teacher in particular than racial/ethnic parents. White parents also did not report more alienation from schools than racial/ethnic parents. White parents did, however, perceive their child's teacher to be significantly more understanding of their needs as parents and felt parents should give schools significantly more input about how to teach

their children than racial/ethnic parents.

The present findings seem inconsistent with suggestions that racial/ethnic individuals are alienated from social structures (Carnegie Corporation, 1984), and conflict with Calabrese's (1990) findings that racial/ethnic parents reported significantly more alienation from schools than White parents. Several possible factors may account for these results.

First, although the elementary school in this study is in an urban area with many economic and social difficulties, the school has begun in recent months efforts to increase parent involvement. These efforts include a community advisory board which involves parents and local businesses charged with finding solutions to local juvenile crime and delinquency problems. It could be that these efforts have increased parents' satisfaction with the school and decreased their feelings of alienation. However, because this was the only school included in the study, it is not possible to determine the effects of these efforts on the parents studied.

A possible explanation for the satisfaction findings may be that racial/ethnic parents did not report actual levels of dissatisfaction. Reasons for this may include not feeling as entitled to positive interactions as White parents, perceiving school personnel as "experts" or "authorities" on education to be revered, not questioned, or having cultural values of not calling attention to oneself or expressing a negative opinion. These factors may predispose some parents to not complain even though

they may be experiencing dissatisfaction. Some possible support for this cultural explanation may lie in the finding that racial/ethnic parents believed parents should have significantly less input in schools than White parents. In addition, the fact that most of the parents surveyed were immigrants could mean that cultural values and beliefs might be a significant factor in understanding these parents' experiences.

Finally, although almost half of the parents chose to complete the survey, it is unclear in what ways those who did not participate may differ in their experiences with schools. It may be, for example, that only those parents who were the least alienated or the most satisfied elected to participate in the survey. Further, school officials estimate that a significant portion of parents in this district are not literate. Because of the format, these parents were not able to participate in the present study, and may have experiences which differ significantly from the study participants.

The present study had several limitations such as the fact that many parents did not complete a survey, making it impossible to know how their responses may have affected the results. Also, only one elementary school was included in this study, thus generalizations of these findings to other populations should only be made with extreme caution. These results may, in fact, not be representative of other racial/ethnic parents' experiences and should be interpreted carefully. In addition, satisfaction, parent input, and teacher understanding were measured using one

four- or five-point, Likert-type question each, not allowing for much variation in participants' responses on these items.

These results have important implications for school counselors and administrators as well as family counselors. Most importantly, those who work with families must to continue to encourage and empower parents, especially racial/ethnic parents, to make their needs known to school personnel. Providing parents with information about schools and orienting them to school grounds and personnel may help them to feel more comfortable in becoming actively involved in school activities.

Schools should continue to find ways to make schools inviting and accessible to parents, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. Ensuring that phone calls, invitations, and announcements are provided in several languages, establishing neighborhood organizations and meetings, offering parent breakfasts or after school activities, and instituting parent initiated activities both in and out of the classrooms are possible ways schools can expand their efforts to include parents educational experiences. Making sure all school personnel know the importance of, and strategies for positive interactions with parents from diverse backgrounds and are committed to this process is a critical component to schools' efforts to increase racial/ethnic parent involvement.

Recommendations for future research include using multiple schools and communities to more comprehensively assess racial/ethnic parent satisfaction and alienation. The development

of a standardized measure of parent satisfaction with multiple items, and which asks about several areas of interactions with schools may improve abilities to accurately detect parents' experiences. Future research must also take into account parent's beliefs about expressing dissatisfaction and the relationship between these beliefs and reported satisfaction. Finally, eliciting responses from more parents, those who may be reluctant to respond or who do not read or write, is important if we are to gain a more complete picture of racial/ethnic parents' experiences with schools.

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Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of All Variables for Total Sample and for White and Racial/Ethnic Parents.

Variable	Total Sample M	Total Sample SD	Racial/Ethnic Parents M	Racial/Ethnic Parents SD	White Parents M	White Parents SD	Min.	Max.
Age	35.84	9.86	36.33	10.19	34.03	8.88	18	72
Generation	2.72	1.69	2.19	1.49	4.75	.65	1	6
Overall Satisfaction	3.99	.90	3.93	.94	4.17	.75	1	5
Alienation	56.77	9.70	57.17	9.13	56.23	10.55	31	79
Satisfaction W/Teacher	3.80	1.26	3.76	1.24	4.10	1.16	1	5
Teacher Understanding	3.70	1.12	3.51	1.15	4.36	.78	1	5
Parent Input	3.38	.79	3.32	.80	3.64	.74	1	4